

Courage Epitomizes Seneca Optimists Corps Members



Courage is defined by Webster's dictionary as stubborn persistence or unwillingness to recognize defeat.

Ken Mulgrew, a 16 year-old baritone horn player in the Seneca Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, must have enough of it to last a lifetime. His lifetime.

He's got a head start on the rest of his life, for the quiet-spoken young man has already suffered one of the most traumatic experiences anyone could imagine.

Young Ken was a member of the solid horn line with the 1975 Toronto Optimists and the even stronger bugle section of the 1976 Seneca Optimists. The

Seneca Optimists became a reality in February, 1976, when the Seneca Princemen and Toronto Optimists merged. Part of the name of each corps was retained to appease all concerned. The merger resulted in the Seneca Optimists finishing 10th at the Drum Corps International finals at Philadelphia in 1976.

Mulgrew, a grade 11 student at Porter Collegiate Institute in Toronto, enjoyed the sensation with the rest of his corps "family" at the conclusion of the DCI finals when the Optimists became members of the elite Top 12. However, when the corps returned to Toronto, Mulgrew perhaps had second thoughts about his future in the corps.

"Ken didn't show for practices from October to December," said corps director, Al Tierney. "I didn't know — perhaps he was contemplating quitting." Then, on December 10, 1976, tragedy struck. While working at a sanitary company, Ken was stuffing trash into a huge garbage disposal unit. One of his co-workers inadvertently pushed the button to activate the machine. The blade came down on Mulgrew's right wrist and his hand was severed. The pressure of the machine was so strong that it pulled him forward. His chin got caught in the "teeth" and was badly crushed.

Further injury was averted only because Mulgrew was wearing safety shoes. The Blade struck his foot but no damage was done. The pain was nearly unbearable, but Mulgrew never lost consciousness.

"I walked into the hospital," he said. "I was in the operating room for five hours for surgery on my wrist and jaw." What about the hand? "They used a crowbar to pry it out," said Mulgrew. "it was so badly mangled that it couldn't be saved." At the hospital, Mulgrew had an extra inch of his wrist severed for fear of infection. His jaw was wired shut. He now has a one inch diameter steel plate in it. "I couldn't open my mouth for two months," said Mulgrew. "I was on a liquid diet all that time."

Early in March, the wires were removed from his jaw. "I lost 15 pounds between the accident and when I was able to eat solid food again," said Mulgrew. "I must have lost five of those pounds in my arm."

How did he feel when he was — at long last — able to open his mouth again and start eating? "Great! God, it felt good. Guess I'm getting used to it now. I'm starting to get pimples

again,” he laughingly admitted. When Ken didn’t show, two of his friends in the corps, Bill Pullin and Kevin O’Connor called to inquire why he wasn’t attending practice sessions.

“I didn’t tell anybody about the accident and only after phoning did Bill and Kevin know what happened,” revealed Mulgrew. “I guess the guys in the corps thought I had just quit.” Quit, he didn’t.

While in the hospital, Ken’s thoughts quite naturally turned to the corps. “I thought after the accident my horn playing days were over,” he recalled. “I thought I’d be in the national (flag) squad. I thought I’d never be able to do anything but carry a flag and stand in the corner of the field while we were competing.

“I also thought I might be able to play the cymbals. When my arm got well enough, a hook was attached to it. I tried out the cymbals at home, but the strain was too much. I couldn’t handle the cymbal properly. It would slide down my hook and I couldn’t manipulate it.” Mulgrew mentioned that his right arm became much smaller than his left one. “Even the right side of my chest got smaller than my left side,” said Mulgrew.

Seneca’s equipment manager, Evert Botterweg, came up with an idea that gave Ken renewed hope. “Mr. Botterweg fixed up my horn by putting an extension on the rotor so it could be played from the reverse side,” stated Ken. Tierney and the Optimist staff thought at first of asking the Drum Corps International office for permission to use two valves on the horn for Mulgrew. That idea was scrapped thanks to Botterweg .

During the recovery period, and after Mulgrew was dismissed from the hospital, he returned to the corps and took part in marching and timing drills. “Everybody came up to me and offered me all kinds of food,” Ken said. “Guess they thought I didn’t have enough in the hospital. They started calling me ‘Hook’ and ‘Lefty’.”

Then came another phase of Mulgrew’s long road back. “I got an artificial hand early in April,” said Mulgrew, who had begun playing his horn again on March 20. “At first my left , arm got tired, but it got stronger the more I practiced. In about a year I’ll get a new hand, a bio-electric one. They couldn’t, or wouldn’t get me one after the accident. My arm is still growing because of my age.”

Ken didn’t have much trouble adjusting after the painful ordeal. “About the only thing I couldn’t do was button my left sleeve with the hook,” confessed Ken, whose eyes suddenly became misty. “I was able to write left handed okay, but I still write better with the hook than I do with my good left hand.”

Now that his outlook with the corps is much brighter than it was early in the year, Ken plans to stay with the Optimists. “I’d like to stay in until I’m 21 and too old to play in the junior ranks,” he said.

“Since the accident, he’s a different young man,” said Tierney. “He’s more outgoing. You’d think what happened would have had the opposite effect on him. He’s quite a young man now.” Tierney’s assistant, Rick Brown, tended to agree. “It’s had to say what the accident has done to him,” said Brown. “The trauma of it all might hit some day. Perhaps it already has and he’s been able to handle it.”

One thing: Young Mulgrew knows how to handle courage, for he has lots of it.

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